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STATE ALSO FOR DS/IP/NEA AND DS/ITA
NSC FOR ABRAMS

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TAGS: PGOV PTER PREL ASEC CASC TS

SUBJECT: THE GOT AND THE TERRORIST THREAT: SHAKEN, NOT
STIRRED

REF: TUNIS 70 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: AMBASSADOR ROBERT F. GODEC FOR REASONS 1.4 (b) AND (d)

Summary

¶1. (S/NF) In the weeks following its reported disruption of a terrorist plot to attack US and UK embassies and diplomats, the GOT remains unresponsive to repeated USG -- and Tunisian public -- requests for further details on the incident. While there are reports of "hundreds" arrested and security checkpoints remain throughout Tunisia, the GOT continues to claim that it killed or detained the 27 individuals (i.e., everyone) associated with the terrorist group. This claim only fuels ongoing rumors and speculation among the Tunisian public and foreign diplomats that GOT interests may have been among the group's intended targets. While GOT officials continue to extol Ben Ali's social and economic plan to combat extremism, this recent security threat suggests this effort has not been successful. Even as the USG stresses the importance of increased political freedom to combat terrorism, particularly in light of recent events, there is no evidence the GOT is rethinking its strategy or its tactics. End Summary.

The Party Line

¶2. (U) At a January 12 meeting of ruling RCD party functionaries, Minister of Interior Rafik Belhaj Kacem, in the most detailed public GOT comments, said that GOT security forces had killed or detained 27 individuals with Salafist and terrorist allegiances, including one Mauritanian, involved in the thwarted attacks. Belhaj Kacem also publicly confirmed, for the first time, that foreign embassies and diplomats were believed to be targets of the group. The Minister also stressed that security forces remain watchful to protect Tunisia "against all forms of criminality, extremism and terrorism."

¶3. (S) Although senior GOT officials briefed Ambassador on

these details in the days before Belhaj Kacem's announcement, and shared, on January 12, the list of US diplomats found in the group's possession (reflets), the GOT has since provided few additional details. On January 26, Minister of State Abdelaziz Ben Dchia told Ambassador that the GOT "continues to follow" the matter. Despite this, as of January 30, our attempts to obtain further information or solicit greater cooperation, particularly from Ministry of Interior contacts, go largely unanswered.

Cases Swamp the Courts

¶4. (C) Even as the GOT continues to claim 15 individuals associated with the group have been arrested, many more have reportedly appeared in court in recent weeks. Mohamed Emira, Supervisory Government Prosecutor at the Court of First Instance, told ConOff on January 6 that he was "very busy" with cases related to the incident. During a meeting with ConOff on another topic, Emira was repeatedly interrupted to deal with these cases. Mokhtar Jellali, a lawyer defending some of the "hundreds" accused, told PolFSN that many of the accused appeared in court to face charges on January 6. One human rights activist reported that whole families were being detained along with those suspected of involvement in, or support for, the terrorist group. Specific numbers of those arrested or charged are lacking, but Jellali characterized the government's case against the mostly young people he represents as "weak."

The Threat

¶5. (S/NF) In addition to the large numbers of arrests, the reportedly entrenched organization of the terrorist group also suggests that it was more substantial and better organized than the GOT has admitted. Some of those involved reportedly fled into Libya or Algeria, while others may have gone underground in Tunisia. It is unclear what kind of organized threat to USG interests remains, but it is unlikely that, as the GOT has claimed, US and UK embassies and diplomats were the sole targets. Many Tunisians dislike Ben Ali's repression and alleged corruption. In addition to discontent among nationals, the GOT's anti-veil campaign and secular nature has led religious conservatives in the Muslim and Arab world to denounce the government as anti-Muslim. Such sentiments, combined with the fact that the plotters were able to form a group, enter the country, and muster resources in a strict security environment, suggest that it is more probable that the group was also planning attacks against GOT interests in Tunisia.

What Threat?

¶6. (S/NF) Despite these widespread doubts and concerns, no one in the GOT is straying from the official line that diplomatic entities were the only target. While GOT talking points are repeated ad nauseam, in this case it appears that a handful of senior officials oversaw the operation to take down the group and have maintained tight control over all related information. It is rumored that the whole operation was based out of the Presidential Palace, and the fact that subsequent reshuffles were limited to security and political officials in the Presidency rather than in the ministries suggests that the Palace was directly involved in the response. In fact, Ben Ali, who is wont to reshuffle portfolios regularly, did not change any of the leaders of the state security apparatus in his January 25 partial Cabinet reshuffle, which suggests he was satisfied with the official response. (Note: On January 26, the GOT announced a partial Cabinet reshuffle, involving the Ministries of Higher Education and Scientific Research, as well as a few second- and third-tier Cabinet portfolios. End Note.) It is unclear

how involved Ben Ali himself was in the security operations or to what extent he is familiar with the details. He has made no public statements on domestic security in months, though he has made several public appearances.

¶7. (S/NF) While ministers and ruling RCD party leaders praise Ben Ali's ongoing efforts to address the social and economic causes of extremism, this security threat seems to have proven that Ben Ali's theory of politics is fallible. In the years since his successful dismantling of the Islamic threat embodied by the now banned Islamic an-Nahdha political party, Ben Ali argued that progressive social policies and brisk economic growth would undermine popular support for religious conservatism. Ben Ali appears satisfied that his usual talking points on his commitment to education, economic prosperity and social development still have resonance with the broader population and will forestall any demands for greater political freedom. In fact, GOT officials are quick to suggest that US efforts to promote democracy in the region have been more destabilizing than productive. Historically, there has been a tacit agreement that the GOT will guarantee domestic security in exchange for complete political control over the populace. However, it is clear that many Tunisians believe that recent events prove that the GOT's approach has not been successful in combating extremism. Further, many argue it is the corruption of Ben Ali and his extended family that threatens Tunisia's continued moderation and prosperity.

It remains unclear if these sentiments mark a shift in Tunisian society that could result in future mobilization of the public against the Ben Ali regime.

The Road Ahead

¶8. (S/NF) Despite the glossy spin that everything is under control, we are still monitoring the situation carefully in coordination with our GOT and other embassy contacts. Although the GOT claims to have neutralized the threat, we continue to press for faster and better counter terrorism cooperation. EmbOffs are also engaging foreign counterparts to gather additional details and compare notes. (NOTE: On January 24, the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office issued revised travel advice for Tunisia to reflect the security incidents. END NOTE.) We will continue these efforts in an attempt to decipher the full story.

¶9. (S/NF) Finally, it appears clear that -- to some extent -- the GOT's control of the security situation has diminished. But, while the GOT asserts that it has full control, Tunisians are less confident. The Ambassador and other US officials have stressed to Ben Ali and other GOT officials the importance of increased political freedom as a counter to extremism. However, in recent weeks, GOT officials appear even more convinced that the root causes of extremism are social and economic rather than political and that the same stale talking points apply.

GODEC